

FR ALEXANDER SCHMEMANN AND MONASTICISM

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One must always remember that in the categories of “this world” Christianity cannot but be paradoxical.

— Fr Alexander Schmemmann

The topic of my paper today, “Schmemmann and Monasticism,” is not a simple one. One finds contradictory portrayals, both negative and positive, of the institution of monasticism in Schmemmann’s earlier works. His later personal diaries reveal a constant *irritation* with monastic spirituality and culture, together with a self-critical struggle against his own irritation. There is, in short, a poignant *tension* between Schmemmann and monasticism.

I believe this is because the phenomenon *Alexander Schmemmann*, on the one hand, and the phenomenon *monasticism*, on the other, are representative of a fundamental Christian antinomy. This antinomy, which Schmemmann himself often thematized in his works, is the existence of the Church “in this world,” while being “not of this world.” It is the same antinomy that lies at the heart of the tension between Martha and Mary in the Gospel; between the “empire” and the “desert” in the Christian East throughout the centuries;¹ between the so-called “incarnational” and “eschatological” dimensions of the Church; and between the “white” and “black” clergy even today. So the tension between Fr Alexander Schmemmann, a married priest and ardent missionary of Orthodoxy in the West, and traditional Orthodox monasticism, is almost inevitable. Indeed, the tension created by this antinomy seems inherent to the very existence of the Church, whose life

1 G. Florovsky, “Imperiia i pustynia. Antinomii khristianskoi istorii,” in E. Kholmogorov, E. Karmanov, & V. Pisiakov (eds), *Dogmat i istoriia* (Moscow, 1998), 256–91.

pulsates in a productive, albeit tense, interplay of both the "contemplative" and "active" charismas. For this reason a reflection on Schmemmann's place within this antinomy can elucidate, more than anything else, his *ecclesiology*, i.e., his vision of the Church, as well as his special vocation in it.

In what follows I shall first let Fr Alexander himself speak on monasticism and related topics, quoting his monographs and diaries generously. At the same time, I shall take a critical look at certain aspects of his ecclesiology, eschatology, and, finally, of his own very unique *charisma*, which, when taken together, seem to make traditional monasticism go against his grain. Because any attempt to understand the "tension" described above must view Schmemmann's comments on monasticism within this broader context of his theology and genius.

Schmemmann's Earliest Portrayal of Monasticism in The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy

It is in Fr Alexander's earliest monograph, *Istoricheskii put' Pravoslaviia* (The Historical Road of [Eastern] Orthodoxy), first published in Russian in 1954 when the author was 33 years old, that we find his most positive thoughts on the institution of monasticism. Here Schmemmann offered a proper *apologia* of monasticism, defending its ethos of "renunciation of the world" as a fundamentally Christian concept against "Harnack and other historians" who saw it as a derivation from Manichaeism or Neo-Platonism.²

The author builds his defense of monasticism on a rather toned-down eschatology, stressing the continuous need for ascetic struggle in the face of the evil that "continues to reign" in this world:

... in Christ the glory of the coming Kingdom was revealed to man ... All is now driven toward that final point, and everything is measured by it. In this world, however, evil continues to reign; it hinders us from reaching the King-

2 A. Schmemmann, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1977), 105.

dom, tearing us away from it by thousands of temptations and illusions. The road of the Christian is to be the narrow road of struggle; does not the Gospel speak of the strength of evil, of the struggle against it, or of renunciation for the sake of the Kingdom?³

Schmemmann goes on to praise the impact of monasticism on Church history in the highest of terms:

It must be flatly stated that until now monasticism has shown us the only practical "success" of Christianity, unique in nature, tested by experience, and confirmed by thousands of examples. (This does not, of course, exclude the possibility of other approaches to the spiritual life). In the course of the centuries, the visage of the sainted monk has towered over the whole Christian world and illuminated it.⁴

In this work Fr Alexander is nonetheless aware of the problem that monastic *solitude* presents for what he called "the original experience of the Church"; "the unity and the assembly of all together, crowned and expressed in the sacrament of communion by all with one bread and one cup." So he asks: "Does not the monastic ideal of solitude as a condition for salvation contradict the original experience of the Church?" Coming again to the defense of monastics, he answers:

[Monastic solitude] was a reaction to the danger of easy sacramentalism, which had gained strength in the fourth century... While practicing asceticism in solitude, the monks convened on the Lord's Day for the Eucharist, the assembly. Yet in their solitary asceticism they reveal the whole range of responsibility imposed on the Christian by his participation in the sacrament, and demonstrate what absolute demands it makes upon the conscience of those whom it sanctifies.⁵

It is remarkable that here Fr Alexander is lending his support to individual, even solitary ascetical preparation for Holy

3 Ibid, 106.

4 Ibid, 108.

5 Ibid, 107-8.

Communion, as distinct from his later thoughts on the topic. For it is precisely the "ascetical individualism" of monastic eucharistic practice that Schmemmann later, in his well-known *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, held responsible for the regrettable shift in the Church's liturgical piety.⁶

But before proceeding to that later work, I must quote Fr Alexander's conclusive statement on monasticism in his earlier monograph, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy*. This passage reveals an evident struggle in his thinking; a sincere attempt to reconcile monasticism with the problems it posed for his own vision of the Church; to *reconcile* those in the Church who "renounce" the world with those who "deal" with it:

How can we reconcile the almost complete dominance of this monastic image [in the history of the church] with the development of the Christian world? Would not the triumph of monasticism deprive it of all meaning? If monasticism and the desert were recognized as the highest norm even by those who were building that Christian world or dealing with it, would not this "building" itself become an illusory and sinfully vain matter? Here we touch on the last and most important apparent contradiction of the age of Constantine in Church history.⁷

In what follows Schmemmann succeeds in reconciling the "desert-dwellers" with the "builders" of the Christian world, offering an eloquent synthesis of the two:

If each approach had constituted a condemnation of the other, there would be only absurdity. But the uniqueness of the age of Constantine was that both monasticism and the building of a Christian world were regarded—not in terms of theory but in living experience—as equally essential and complementary. Harnessed together, they preserved the integrity of the evangelical outlook, though perhaps only the vision of it. The world receives a Christian sanction and is blessed by the Church, but monasticism became the "salt"

6 *Vvedenie v liturgicheskoe bogoslovie* (Paris, 1961), 161–62; 240; 244.

7 *Idem, Historical Road*, 109.

which does not allow the world to absorb Christianity and subject it to itself. In the light of this eternal reminder, the world already regarded itself as an image that passes... The monks withdraw, but from the desert they bless the Christian empire and the Christian city, and they never weary of praying for them...⁸

Schmemmann immediately admits that this image of "symphony" between the "desert" and the "empire" was scarcely embodied as a reality, since the world "continued to be the same unadmitted idol, requiring services to itself," while monasticism "frequently turned into spiritual individualism and disdain for the rest of life. Nonetheless," he concludes, "an inner standard for Christian action in history had been found."

Thus from the outset of his theological writing in 1954, Fr Alexander recognizes the problem of *mutual condemnation* between the "desert" and the "empire," rejecting it as *absurdity*. He also sees in monastic renunciation, struggle, and solitude Christian phenomena rooted in the Gospel, and bases his "defense" of monastic practice on a very moderate eschatology that stresses the "not yet" of the Church's experience in this world. What is more, he accepts the *dominance* of the monastic ethos in Church history.

Introduction to Liturgical Theology

Five years later, Schmemmann defended his doctoral dissertation, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, at the St Serge Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris. In this work, first published in 1961,⁹ we find a decisively "tuned up" eschatology that stresses the "already," i.e., the *fullness* of the Church's experience in this world. In this work Fr Alexander is also more critical of the institution of monasticism. I shall first take a look at this development in Schmemmann's eschatology, which forms the cornerstone of his liturgical theology, and establish its relation to his changed perception of monasticism.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ *Vvedenie v liturgicheskoe bogoslovie* (Paris, 1961).

As before, the theologian recognizes the ephemeral quality of this world: "This world shall pass," he writes, "the Lord shall reign in glory. The Church awaits this completion of time; she is focused on this final triumph."¹⁰ But throughout this work Fr Alexander decidedly stresses the "this-worldly" aspect of Orthodox eschatology, repeatedly regarding the *ἔσχατον* as something *already present, already given in the Church*. For Schmemann the Church experiences the *ἔσχατον* of the Kingdom now, in the "time of the Church," most of all in the Eucharist:

In other words, the eschatologism (*εσχολογизм*) of the Eucharist lies not in "renunciation of the world," or in an escape from time (*не в устремлении из времени*), but first and foremost in the confirmation of the reality, the actuality, the presence of Christ's Kingdom, which is "within" the Church, that is to say, already here, but which will be revealed to all in glory only at the end of "this world." This is an overcoming of time—not in the sense of its negation or devaluation—but in the sense of the possibility to be communicants of, or participants in the "coming eon," of the fullness, joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit, while living in "this world."¹¹

In other words, Christ's Kingdom is already here *for the Church*, but will be revealed *to all*, to those outside the Church, only at the end of time. This is why for Schmemann the real *raison d'être* of the Church and her most important objective in this world is the spread of the *fullness* of this *ἔσχατον* from within her to the outside world:

The Church is left in the world in order to continuously save it through her eschatological fullness; in order to illuminate, judge, and fill its life, its history, and its time with meaning through the *parousia*, i.e., through the coming, presence, and expectation of Christ.¹²

This accentuation of the "outer" mission of the Church, to which

¹⁰ Ibid, 87.

¹¹ Ibid, 85–86.

¹² Ibid, 36.

Fr Alexander had a true vocation as a powerful and even brilliant speaker, seems to neglect the existence of an “inner” mission of the Church and of the sacrament closely related to that inner mission, *repentance*. That is to say, Schmemmann’s inspiring vision of a Church illuminating the world with its eschatological fullness does not make clear that *her own members* are often in need of illumination and restoration; that they lead a life of struggle in a world that “lies in evil.” In other words, there is little if any place in this picture for a *repenting or struggling* Church.

This is precisely why Schmemmann runs into problems with monasticism, which now begins to clash with his vision of the Church. We have seen that in his earlier work, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy*, Fr Alexander defended the “renunciation of the world,” solitude, and ascetic struggle of the early monastics as legitimate, Gospel-rooted Christian phenomena. Now, in his *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, he begins his discussion of monasticism in a similar vein, agreeing with the commonly held premise that monasticism was essentially rooted in the “maximalism” and “eschatologism” of the Early Church.¹³ Yet, Schmemmann continues, there was something *radically new* about monasticism, as distinct from the life of the Early Church, and that “novelty” was the *anachoresis* (*ἀναχώρησις*, withdrawal)¹⁴ of monastics from the world:

... this *anachoresis* or separation was the fundamental novelty of monasticism, as it unfolded from the beginning of the fourth century; a phenomenon that was unprecedented in the life and consciousness of the Church.¹⁵

It is difficult to see Schmemmann’s point, if only because Christ himself withdrew to the wilderness (Mk 1:12–13; Mt 4:1–11;

13 Ibid, 150ff.

14 Schmemmann uses the Greek word *ἀναχώρησις* and then translates it as *separation*. In patristic usage it has a range of other meanings including *departure*, *withdrawal*, *retirement*, *solitude*, or even *flight*. See these and other possible translations in G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (London, 1961), 129.

15 Ibid, 153.

Lk 4:1–13) and thus offered an important enough precedent for Christian *anachoresis*.

Be that as it may, Fr Alexander goes on to note the “ascetical and individual metamorphosis of the approach to the Eucharist, which occurred under the pressure of monasticism (*под давлением монашества*).” As distinct from his earlier defense of monastic eucharistic piety, Schmemmann now repeatedly bemoans the “ascetical individualism” that entered popular piety as a result of monastic influence.¹⁶

The most obvious cause of this change in the theologian's attitude toward monasticism is his focus on the antinomy of the Church “in this world,” yet “not of this world.” As we saw above, Schmemmann arrives at an increasingly “eschatologized” vision of the Church, according to which the Church's principle calling is to illuminate, evangelize, fulfill “this world” and “this life.” Monasticism falls short of this objective:

... monasticism was a departure from life and its cares for the sake of prayer ... It was not a matter of illuminating life and its cares with prayer, nor of uniting them to prayer, not even of turning life into prayer. But it was about prayer [understood] as life, more exactly—the replacement of life with prayer. Because monasticism is born in the experience of failure; in the weakening of the initial objective; in the experience of the impossibility of uniting the two poles of the fundamental Christian antinomy—“not of this world” and “in this world.”¹⁷

I think it is Fr Alexander's focus on the *one* “Church in this world—not of this world” dichotomy—to the exclusion of others—that results in this somewhat awkward depiction of monasticism. Remarkably, in this work Schmemmann devotes almost ten pages¹⁸ to the origins of monasticism and monastic piety without ever using the word *repentance* (μετάνοια).¹⁹

16 Ibid, 161–62; 240; 244.

17 Ibid, 158.

18 Ibid., 155–64.

19 Cf. a typical example of monastic thinking from John Moschos: “About Abba Tha-

Fr Alexander will mention “repentance” only later in his book and in a negative light, to say that it was monastic piety that contributed to the “ascetical-repentant” approach to liturgy that dominates the *Typikon* to this day.²⁰ And yet it is the mystery of repentance that sheds light not only on monasticism, but on important Christian antinomies that Schmemmann excludes from his picture of the Church’s “lex credendi”: *the life-giving Cross; victory through death; joy-creating weeping*, etc. It is in the productive tension of all these antinomies that the Church’s experience finds expression in her “lex orandi,” or rule of prayer.

More important for the “bigger picture” of Schmemmann’s ecclesiology is that its virtual silence on repentance inevitably results in an inattention to the Church’s *inner* mission. This *inner mission*, which is accomplished through the continuous restoration, renewal, and fortification of the fallen pieces of the Church’s edifice through the mystery of repentance, plays no visible role in Fr Alexander’s conception of the Church’s “lex orandi” (rule of prayer). This is particularly important for our topic, since the constructive force of repentance makes not only rebirth possible within the Church; it is also what makes possible the quest for this rebirth in the form of monasticism.

So although I would agree with Fr Alexander that “monasticism is born in the experience of failure,” I would formulate it more precisely and say: “*repentance* is born in the experience of failure.” For this is an experience common to the entire Church—monastic and non-monastic alike. I believe that a recognition of this common experience could bridge the gap between Fr Alexander’s thinking and traditional monasticism. It also expands his somewhat reductionist ecclesiology that focuses on only one of the paradoxes of Church’s life.

laleos. A presbyter of the lavra there, Abba Peter, told us about Abba Thalaleos the Kilikian that he struggled as a monastic for sixty years and wept incessantly, saying: ‘God has given us the time of this life for repentance, and will demand from us a strict answer with regard to it.’ *Lug Dukhovnyi* (Sergiev Posad, 1915), 76.

20 Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 220.

The Schmemmann of his Diaries (1973—1983) and Other Works

Aside from the theological premises underlying Schmemmann's picture of monasticism, there is also a rather non-theological dimension to our topic, and that is: he was *simply not the monastic type*. In other words, his particular vocation or charisma in the Church, his unique disposition, personality, genius,—whatever we choose to call it—was of a non-monastic nature. At the risk of venturing onto wholly unscientific ground, I would suggest that this is the most important factor in the "Schmemmann-Monasticism" dilemma I have attempted to disentangle.

Clearly, the question of any given individual's unique "charisma" in the Church is a mystery that is not open to judgment or evaluation by our inevitably limited observations. Moreover, I did not have the honor and joy of having known Fr Alexander personally, as some of you here did, so forming an impression of his personality is all the more difficult. But I do have at my disposal an invaluable witness to his character—Schmemmann's personal diaries; that is to say, his own observations of himself during the last ten years of his life (1973—1983). Some excerpts from these diaries do allow us to discern a certain *incompatibility* of this extraordinary man with the dynamics and demands of the Church's *inner* mission, as well as with the spirituality and culture of traditional monasticism. At the same time, this very disposition enables Schmemmann to take a refreshingly honest look at his own Church's tradition in both its positive and negative manifestations: he saw life and asked questions about it in a way that others simply did not. He talks about this gift in the following entrance in his diary from March 11, 1980:

My principal and constant feeling—is a sense of *life*. It is very hard to express this in words. Perhaps the word "amazement" comes closest to this feeling, a perception of each moment and each state of mind as a *gift* (as distinct from something "self-explanatory" or "self-evident"). Everything is always new, everything is always not simply life, but a

meeting with life and hence something of a revelation... As I write this I realize that these are not the [appropriate] words, but I cannot find others. I only know that this gift, this revelation demands attention; an answer.... Maybe everyone feels this way. But sometimes it seems to me that they do not; that many people, perhaps even the overwhelming majority lives, *not noticing life*.²¹

Together with his capacity for faith-inspired *joy* and *gratitude*, Fr Alexander's capacity for self-critical Orthodoxy is an inspiring model for monastics and non-monastics alike.

In one of many similar entrances on his dislike for "personal" conversations, hearing confessions, giving "spiritual" counsel, Fr Alexander writes on Feb. 22, 1973:

Confession. You give counsel to someone else: one must begin with the insignificant, then build, collect oneself, gradually liberate oneself. But you yourself?

The horrible difficulty for me of personal conversations. Almost an aversion to any "intimacy." A torturous dislike for hearing confessions. What is there to "talk about" so much in Christianity? And what for?²²

It is not only hearing confessions, but generally dealing with the dynamics of guiding parishioners in the so-called "spiritual" life or "spiritual" *struggle* that really did not appeal to Schmemmann. This is consistent with the inattention to *repentance* and *inner mission* in his works as described above. Moreover, the very idea of a "spiritual" life (almost always in quotation marks in Schmemmann's diaries) annoyed him, as he admits in this entry from September 10, 1980:

... everything I read about this "spiritual" life; everything I see in people, who supposedly live it, somehow "irritates" me (*меня «раздражает»*). What is this—self-defense? Jealousy toward those who live that life and hence a desire *dénigré* [to denigrate, put down]? But then somewhere I happen to

21 A. Schmemmann, *Dnevnik 1973–1983* (Moscow, 2005), 520.

22 Ibid, 12.

read a quotation from Symeon the New Theologian about the necessity to "hate" the body. And immediately I feel that it is not only the "worst" in me that does not accept this, but also something else.

Why ... has this "spiritual tendency" («духовная линия») resulted in the faithful somehow not feeling the Church herself, nor the Eucharist, nor gratitude, nor joy—*not wanting* this, but wanting fear, grief, and some almost malevolent rejection of all this?²³

In an earlier entry in his journal, Fr Alexander similarly questioned both this "spirituality" and his own aversion to it:

I keep reflecting on "spirituality" («духовность»). To put it simply, I will say the following: I am amazed by the egocentricity of this "spirituality"; the "me" that protrudes from it. It has been my experience for some thirty years that students with tendencies toward "spirituality" are almost always unpleasant—troublemakers. "I will write an essay on ascetical theology" [they say]—and immediately, automatically, a whiff of *pride* (*Look at me!*), i.e., the most deadly enemy of spirituality. Priests who insist on services "with no omissions" are almost always mediocre pastors. And so on. Sometimes I think that this type of "spirituality" is a real temptation (*самое настоящее искушение*); pride; self-confirmation. I don't know. I know that I am "not spiritual." I know with certainty that in this area there is something I do not sense (that is, I feel no attraction to Theophan the Recluse and Ignatii Brianchaninov), that here something *repulses* me (*меня отталкивает*). But I don't know whether I'm mistaken in this repulsion. Maybe there is something I don't see, don't hear...²⁴

Whatever it is that Fr Alexander fails to "sense" in this area, he is able to both *see* and *hear* the deficiencies of an Orthodox piety that often lacks the capacity for self-criticism. One of these deficiencies intuited by Schmemmann, a dearth of joy in

23 Ibid, 534.

24 Ibid, 501–2.

Church life, contrasts with his own experience of life as joy. Indeed, Fr Alexander experienced his faith, his life, his family, his natural surroundings as joy. He often reflects on the words from Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, rejoice." Schmemmann called this "the Epistle of all Epistles";²⁵ for him the Gospel is first and foremost about *great joy*, "with the proclamation and arrival of which the Gospel begins,"²⁶ he writes, and he repeatedly laments the fact that Christians reject or neglect this gift.

Fr Alexander's accentuation of this gift, this *charisma* with which he was endowed in abundance, is remarkable and uplifting. I would like to note, however, that it does not exclude the possibility of *other* charismata or spiritual "types" in the Church, who may experience that Christianity is "first and foremost" about *love*, about *compassion*, about *sacrifice*, about *humility*, or something else. While for Schmemmann the Gospel *begins with* the proclamation of "great joy" (and indeed, one of the gospels has a proclamation of "great joy" in its second chapter, Lk 2:10), another theologian might say—no less accurately—that the Gospel begins with *repentance* or even *asceticism*. For the first words uttered by Jesus Christ when He begins to preach are "Repent (μετανοεῖτε): for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 4:17; cf. Mk 1:4 and 15); three of the four gospels begin with the birth and/or preaching of the ascetic John the Baptist (Mk 1: 2–8; Lk 1:5–25; Jn 1:6ff).

It is not my point to argue *against* Fr Alexander's experience of the Gospel as joy. That would be absurd. It would be equally absurd to suggest that Fr Alexander Schmemmann was somehow unaware of repentance, or of the Church's inner mission, or of spiritual struggle. For example, in his classic *Great Lent. Journey to Pascha*, first published in 1969, Schmemmann focused on repentance and even noted that "Christ's first word when He began to preach was:

25 Ibid, 569. Cf. also 28, 526, 569, 572 etc.

26 Ibid, 572.

'Repent'.²⁷ And in an early article, "The Missionary Imperative," Fr Alexander described the inner mission of the Church—"the sanctification, the growth in holiness, of both the Christian individual and the Christian community, the 'acquisition by them of the Holy Spirit' as the first aspect of the Church; "the ultimate goal of Christian life..."²⁸ But these themes are rare in Schmemmann's work; he generally tended to place his accents elsewhere. So different personalities or, if you will, spiritual "types" can read the same Gospel, but single out different aspects of it, reflecting their own *charismata*. In the words of St Ephrem of Syria, "Each person hears [every word of our Lord] in accordance with his capacity, and it is interpreted in accordance with what has been given to him."²⁹ This type of divergence in *emphases* seems to be at the heart of the "Schmemmann vs. Monasticism" antinomy.

Another such divergence appears in the area of asceticism, or spiritual *struggle*, as mentioned above. We know from Fr Alexander's diaries that he was extremely busy, was often forced to engage in activities, conferences, meetings, conversations, etc., whereas he would rather be working on his books, be with his family, at Labelle, or elsewhere. So his life was hardly devoid of a *struggle* with the self, a putting himself last after his service to others. However, he did not perceive of his life as "struggle," and criticized himself very strongly in this regard:

This is my *main* sin: I do not refuse myself anything. Perhaps it is true that compared to other people, there is not that much that I "*would like*" (as distinct from the moral, decisive "*I want*"). But nonetheless I do not at all oppose this "*would like*." And when I realize this, I am horrified (*мне становится страшно*): a complete absence of struggle, of

27 A. Schmemmann, *Great Lent. Journey to Pascha* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1974), 9.

28 Originally published in *The Theology of Christian Mission*, ed. G. H. Anderson (New York: McGraw Hill, 1961), 250–57; reprinted in A. Schmemmann, *Church, World, Mission* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1979), 209–16, esp. 213–14.

29 St Ephrem of Syria, *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 7.22, tr. C. McCarthy (Oxford, 1993). Cf. J. Behr, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2006), 69.

that “invisible warfare,” about which there is so much written in spiritual literature...³⁰

So again Schmemmann questions his own approach to Christian life, noting its difference from the ascetic tradition and even condemning himself for it.

At the same time, his frustrations and doubts concerning “spirituality” and, more precisely, monastic spirituality, continued. In a diary entrance of September 19, 1981, Fr Alexander comments on the difficulties of some newly-organized monastic communities:

What amazes me most about all these ceaseless “difficulties” is *ingratitude*. All these monks are always unhappy (*Всем этим монахам—всегда плохо*). People “don’t understand” them, hinder their “monasticism,” offend them and so on. There is always some kind of crisis,” and always, alas, egocentrism...³¹

What remained a source of frustration for Schmemmann, however, was not only the spiritual shortcomings of monasticism, but its outer, “Byzantine” form and culture, and, most of all, its relation *to this world*. This is what he had to say about a well-organized Serbian women’s monastery on the outskirts of Belgrade during his visit there on September 26, 1980:

A female monastery. With us is the young abbess Evgeniia. Everything is “in the classical style.” The downcast eyes, the gait, the quiet voice... But doubts creep up into the soul. Not about her, of course. She is evidently impeccable in this *classicalness*. But about this whole style. The heaps of icons—mostly horrific ones—in church. The rock-solid fidelity to *form*, to the absolute sameness of type. A departure not so much from the world, as from *this world*, in the name of another, previous world that is archaic, waterproof, and void of any “problematics”... I don’t know, I just don’t know. On the one hand, [I feel] admiration (*восхищение*) for this all-powerful—for these nuns and others like them—“antipode”

30 March 16, 1980. Ibid, 522.

31 Ibid, 584.

to the demonic ugliness and grayness of [Serbia's] socialism. But on the other hand—the feeling that this antipode—in this form—is powerless and condemned to failure. Destroy the [outer] form, and perhaps nothing will remain...³²

So Fr Alexander was concerned about a disharmony between monastic culture and *this* world; he saw the “otherness” (*иночество*) of monasticism as escapism that lacked inner, Christian content.

In these last few years of his life Fr Alexander was disturbed by the dominance of this “monastic line” in Orthodoxy, as he writes in his diary on October 2, 1980:

Now [we have] the triumph—in theology and in piety—of the “monastic line”... Everywhere—patristics. What troubles me is the identification of this line with Orthodoxy. This is not just *pars pro toto* [a part instead of the whole], but a confusion of this line with the *toto* itself. ...I cannot shake off the feeling that all of this is a certain *romanticism*; a love for this *image* of Orthodoxy, and a love precisely because this image is so radically distinct from the image of the *contemporary* world... [It is] an escape, a departure, a reduction of Orthodoxy to oneself...³³

Somewhat later Schmemmann imagines his own version of a monasticism that would avoid these pitfalls, as he describes in his diary:

More and more often it seems to me that a “rebirth” of monasticism (which everyone is talking about with rapture) or even an attempt to do so can only be possible with an initial liquidation of the monastic “institution.” That is, this whole vaudeville of klobuks, mantias, stylizations and so on. If I were a “starets,” I would say to the candidate who was “seeking the monastic life” (*взыскующим иночество*), more or less the following: get a job, the simplest possible one, involving no “creativity” (as a bank teller, for example); as you work, pray and “accumulate” inner peace, do not harbor malice, do not seek “your own” (rights, fairness

32 Ibid, 537.

33 Ibid, 539.

etc.). Perceive *each and every one* (the colleague, the client) as if they were sent to you, pray for them; having paid the rent for the humblest of apartments and for the humblest of food, give [the rest] of your money to the poor—but precisely to the poor, to individuals, and not to “charitable organizations”; always go to one and the same church and there try to help *in a real way* (not by reading lectures about spiritual life or icons, not by “teaching”...). Hold fast to this *service* and be completely obedient to the parish rector in church matters; do not seek to serve of your own volition, do not be grieved if “your talents have not been used,” help out and serve where it is *needed*, and not where you think it is needed; read and study as you can—but do not only read “monastic literature,” but *more broadly* (this point needs more precision); if your friends and acquaintances invite you over because you are close, go—but with “differentiation” (с “*рассуждением*”), and not often. Do not stay for over an hour and a half or two hours. After that any even most friendly atmosphere is harmful; dress absolutely like everyone else, but humbly, and with no “visible” signs of dedication to “spiritual life”; always be simple, light-hearted, and joyous. *Do not teach*. Avoid “spiritual conversations” like fire, and also any empty religious and church talk. If you act in this way, *everything* will be beneficial ...; do not seek out a “spiritual starets” or “director.” If he is needed, God will send him, and will send him when he is needed; having served and worked in this way for *ten years*—and nowise less than that—ask God whether you should go on living like this, or whether you are in need of some sort of *change*. And wait for an answer: it will come, and its indications will be “joy and peace in the Holy Spirit.”³⁴

Not surprisingly, Schmemmann’s idea of monasticism places the monastic in the world. He also eliminates the *monastic community*, so that his monastic interacts with the everyday world and is in no way singled out in its everyday life. More interestingly, he does not want monastics to *teach*; that is, to conduct “spiritual”

34 January 20, 1981. Ibid, 559.

conversations or to "read lectures." This is interesting in light of the fact that we *do* have monastics "in the world" in the Orthodox Church today—bishops and so-called "learned" monastics (*ученое монашество*). And these are almost all involved in "teaching," and sometimes even in "reading lectures." Would Fr Alexander allow for an exception in the case of bishops? Probably. But maybe not in the case of a nun reading a lecture at St Vladimir's Seminary, so I may have been in trouble, were he here with us today.

Conclusion

This brings us to the last point I would like to make today: the boundaries between "monastic" and "worldly" are not as clear-cut in Church *practice* as they seem to be in theory. Indeed, the antinomous poles of "desert" and "empire," "Mary" and "Martha," etc., often exist side-by-side in one and the same individual, just as they are *both* reflected in our liturgical tradition. It is not that an "Ignatii Brianchaninov" had nothing of the "Martha" in him, nor that an "Alexander Schmemmann" had none of the "Mary." But the varying accentuation of the one pole or the other produces different "areas" of activity in the Church, different approaches. It can also produce a tension, a belittling of the value of one approach or the other, or even mutual condemnation.

But I would like to conclude on a reconciling note and recall what Fr Alexander wrote in his earliest monograph: "If each approach had constituted a condemnation of the other, there would be only absurdity." Indeed, the Lord said, "In my Father's house are many mansions" (Jn 14:2), and a discussion of the *superiority* of one mansion over another would be absurdity. For the same Lord forbade his disciples to "dispute among themselves, which of them should be the greatest" (Mk 9:33ff).

So, *can* we lay aside the seemingly irresolvable tension between "white" and "black" in the Church? I think that both in the spirit of the Lord's words that are "not of this world," as well as in the spirit of the recent union of "white" and "black" in our government "in this world," we can confidently answer: *yes, we can!*

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